

KOW: The Ceramic Art of Kenneth O. Weaver

By

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Introduction

For more years than I care to think about, unusual pieces of molded redware art pottery would occasionally surface at antique malls in the Tuscarawas Valley region New Philadelphia, Dover, Strasburg, and Bolivar. Their rather Art Deco shapes belied their heavy, tile-like body and their origin remained a mystery to me until very recently. They were consistently inscribed with the crude but elaborately scrolled initials—K. O. W. —and a date, usually in the 1930s or 1940s.

At one point I was told by what seemed an unimpeachable source that the initials stood for the name of Kay O. Wade, who lived in Sandyville, Stark County, and worked at Sparta Ceramics, producing these in her spare time. The seller, Harry Dutka, insisted he had purchased pieces at Wade's estate sale in Sandyville. There may have been a small kernel of truth in this, but it had nothing to do with Kay O. Wade. No such person could be identified in the 1930 federal census, for example, not in Ohio nor any other state.

That the beautifully glazed pieces were comparable to the prolific “end of day” or “lunch time” pieces manufactured at

the numerous local brick and sewer tile companies of southeastern Ohio seemed obvious, though the handsomely glazed pieces were considerably superior and more artistic in intent as well as execution-- no coarse, granular body and clear salt-glaze for these. Some of the glazes were sophisticated enough and so reminiscent of *Romany* tiles that I even purchased a five year run of *Romany Spartan News and Views*, the monthly employee newsletter for U.S. Ceramic Tile, the company operating the East Sparta plant. Scanning the newsletter pages, nothing jumped out from the accounts of company picnics, birthdays, retirements, bowling league contests, and so forth. No Kay Wade!

Dénouement

Another name that had been suggested to me as the potter was that of Ken Weaver, and the story was similar. Weaver supposedly worked for U. S. Quarry Tile (later U. S. Ceramic Tile Co.) or Sparta Ceramics and had lived in Sandyville, but even C. Harold McCollam's detailed history of the Stark County tile industry offered no leads (McCollam 1976). McCollam's book does provide a detailed account of the history of U.S. Quarry Tile, which began as the U. S. Roofing Tile Co. in 1913, with plants in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and East Sparta, Ohio, and became the United States Quarry Tile Co. in 1926. McCollam also provides the history of East Sparta's "other" two tile plants, the Federal Clay Products Co., later (1936) acquired by United States Quarry Tile, and the East Sparta Clay and Limestone Co., which

morphed into the Sparta Ceramic Co. in 1922. The Sparta Ceramic Co. in turn became a fully owned subsidiary of US. Ceramic Tile in 1954, due in part to the fact that its Spartan tile complemented U. S. Quarry Tile's Romany Tile and due in part to the fact that most of the stockholders of the two companies were the same. Sparta Ceramic, in fact, had been organized by Davis A. Cable (1885-1946), who had been prominent in the early success of U.S. Roofing Tile and whose widow, Gail Cable, continued as president of Sparta Ceramic after the merger.

As for Ken Weaver, he was finally located through the seeming magic of online computerized census data provided by Ancestry.com. A simple search on "Kenneth Weaver" and "Ohio" in the 1930 federal census data base locates Kenneth O. Weaver in Sandyville, Stark Co., aged 34 years, son of Samuel E. Weaver, aged 58 years, both born in Ohio. Samuel is listed as a farmer and Kenneth is listed as a laborer in a tile factory, living on the upper Sandyville-Bolivar Road. Several brothers and sisters are also listed. In 1920 he was listed as a farm and mine worker, son of [Samuel] Edward and Chloe Weaver, along with eight brothers and sisters. Somewhat surprisingly, 1910 found the family in Pleasant Township, Hancock Co., near Findlay, Ohio, where the father was a school superintendent. Backtracking, in 1900 we find them in Belpre Township, Washington Co., Ohio, where the father was a school superintendent. Kenneth was only three years old, having been born in June, 1896.

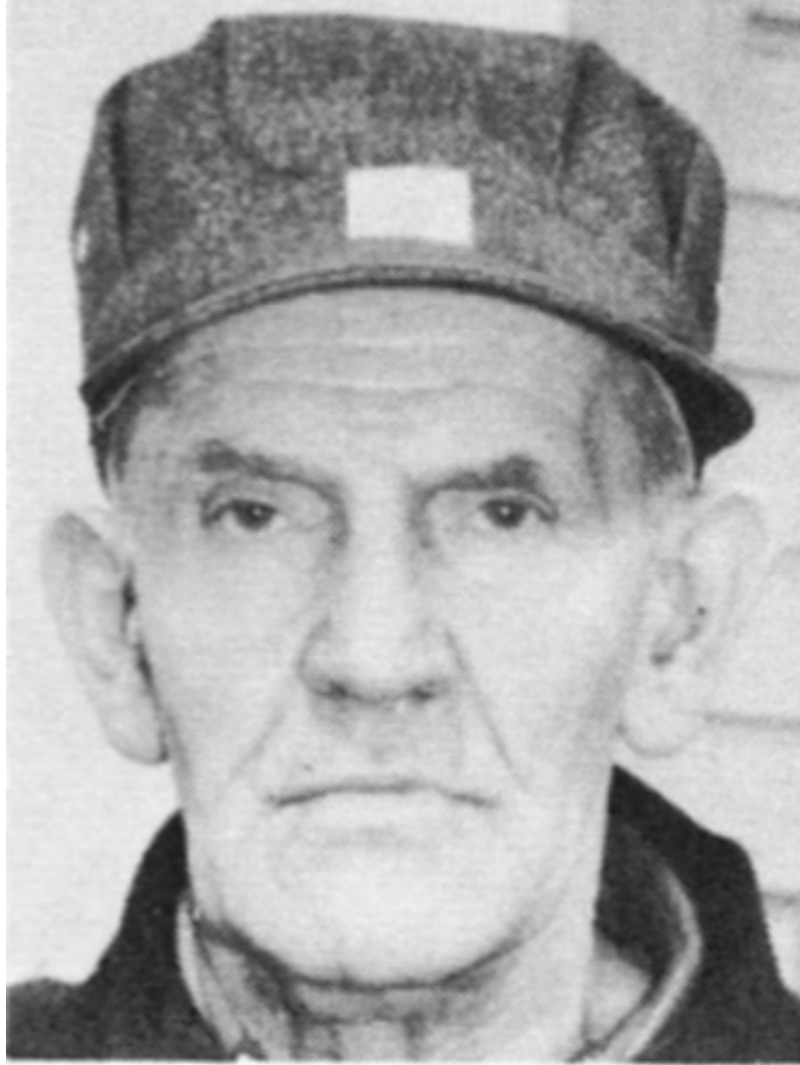
The family link with Sandyville appears to be the fact that Samuel E. Weaver was born there (August 15, 1869), son of John D. and Mary (Cable) Weaver, marrying Chloe Camilla McKinney in Canton, Ohio (June 20, 1895), and dying in Los Angeles, California, May 16, 1955. Wife Chloe was born in East Sparta (January 13, 1876) and died in Sandyville, November 4, 1928. Samuel Weaver's grandfather, Benjamin Franklin Weaver, purchased 70 acres of land in the W ½, SW ¼ Section 3 of Sandy Township in 1832.

By 1875, all or most of this land was owned by a Samuel Cable (1814-1892), John D. Weaver's father-in-law. It would be interesting to be able to relate this Cable family to the Cables who were so prominent in the tile industry of this area but any connection must date prior to the families moving to Ohio, for Samuel's parents, Jonathan and Elizabeth Crise Cable came to Ohio from Somerset Co., Pennsylvania, in 1811, settling first in Jefferson Co., and moving to Sparta in 1813. The more prominent branch of the Cable family, that associated with the tile industry, derives from Joseph Cable (1801-1880), born in Jefferson County before Ohio became a state. He later became a newspaper publisher in Steubenville and New Lisbon and a two term U.S. representative. Later in life he published newspapers in Sandusky, Van Wert, Wauseon, and finally Paulding, Ohio. His son, John Ikirk Cable (1834-1921), was the father of Davis J. Cable (d. 1924), one of the founders of The United States Roofing Tile Co. Davis J. in turn was father of Davis A. and John L. Cable (1884-1971), both men extremely important in the management of U. S.

Quarry Tile and Sparta Ceramics. But it has not yet been possible to link the progenitors, Jonathan and Joseph Cable.

For that matter, there is not a great deal of biographical information available on Kenneth O. Weaver himself. Aside from the genealogical material cited above, we have only a brief note written when he retired and an obituary, published barely two years later. According to the article in *News & Views* (Anonymous 1964), Weaver had worked earlier for the company but began his last period of work May 21, 1923. By the time of his retirement he had worked in practically every department in the plant but especially on dry pan before he started as night watchman in January, 1942. According to this article, Weaver had many hobbies, "one of which was the working up his own glazes for tiles." This may explain why Romany and Sparta tiles never exhibited the more eye-catching glazes exhibited by K.O.W.'s pieces. It certainly explains the great variety of glazes represented in his wares. It is also mentioned that during World War II, when the company supported the war effort by steel annealing, Weaver took obsolete saw blades and ground them to sharp knives with strong handles. These reportedly were very much in demand. Several are still in the possession of the family, and Mrs. Max Keel pronounces them "very good knives."

The retirement article continues, "Many of the older employees have received his ceramic wares," which also suggests that for whatever reason he did not continue pottery making during his last twenty years or so at the U. S. Ceramic Tile comp-



Weaver

Kenneth O. Weaver (1896-1966)

any. It is interesting that the latest piece available is dated 1943, which suggests that even after being transferred to his position as night watchman Weaver was able to continue his ceramic work but for some reason quit more than twenty years before retirement.

Not caring much for travel, Weaver planned to stay at home and cultivate a good garden, focusing on strawberries and popcorn. Sadly, he had only one season in which to pursue this hobby, for he died February 22, 1966, after a three month illness, survived by his wife Catherine and their two foster daughters. Catherine G. Weaver, who had also worked at the tile factory, died August 15, 1978. Both are buried in Green Lawn Cemetery at Sandyville (Anonymous 1966).



Kenneth and Catherine Weaver
(Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



The Work

Thirty-three pieces of K.O.W. pottery are currently available, although more undoubtedly exist. Those at hand range in dates from 1929 to 1943, but the collection is too small to infer much about how active Weaver was from year to year. 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932(?), 1933, and 1936 are represented by only one example each, as might be expected of the earliest years of production; none are available for the first two years of World War II, which may be more than coincidence; 1941 is represented by two examples each; 1934, 1938 and 1943 by three examples; 1937 by four, and 1935 and 1942 by five examples each. As noted, no pieces are known for the last twenty years of Weaver's employment. It is possible he simply lost interest in the hobby or possibly his position as night watchman curtailed the activity. A

larger sample would be needed to infer anything about his activity, and it is possible that both earlier and later examples may be found.

With one exception, all of the available pieces are molded from red clay are marked the same way—a curlicued “K.O.W.” and a year. The pieces tend to be thick-walled and very heavy. The exception is an unsigned “Aladdin’s Lamp” dated 1932 and marked only with the date and U.S.Q.T. Co. It is attributed to Weaver on the basis of the style of the numerals comprising the date and his frequent use of gunmetal glaze.



Aladdin's Lamp Attributed to Weaver, 1932



The Earliest Marked Example of Weaver's Work



Another “Sparkly” Piece with Volcanic Drip Dated 1930

In terms of glazes, probably the most remarkable was used on only two early pieces, made in 1929 and 1930. In normal light these have a “goldstone” glaze comparable to that which Rookwood strained to achieve, although it must be admitted that in sunlight or bright light Weaver’s “glitter” is a little too Christmasy. Perhaps this is the reason Weaver seems not to have used it after 1930. The small pin try is doubly unusual, exhibiting on the inside a white, frosted, “volcanic drip” glaze interior. On another “goldstone” piece dated 1930 and on a somewhat later (1934) example with flambé glaze, this volcanic glaze spills over the lip and a short distance down the sides of the vase, an effect later done to death by other potteries such as Gonder and Robinson-Ransbottom. This innovation has sometimes been attributed to Lawton Gonder (Boshears 2001: 14, Hoopse 1992: 6), although Gonder did not begin work at Mt. Gilead’s Florence Pottery until 1936 (where such “volcanic glazes” seem to have rarely been used) and did not start his own pottery in Zanesville until 1942. Gonder enthusiasts might be tempted to dismiss Weaver’s volcanic glaze as accidental, especially since only two examples are known, but his work clearly predates Lawton Gonder’s popularization of the technique. (It is interesting to note that Gonder served a long apprenticeship with several tile companies before managing the Florence Pottery so would be familiar with tile glazes.)

The same has to be said of another of Weaver’s impressive glazes, the red or orange and sometimes green flambé. Hoopes (192: 5) and the Boshears (2001: 13) credit Lawton Gonder with “the first *commercial* production of flambé glazes” [italics added]. Technically this is correct, since Weaver did not produce pottery commercially, but he clearly had developed both red and green flambé glazes some years before Gonder. The Fulper Pottery, in Flemington, New Jersey, had also produced flambé glazes much earlier in the century—on a commercial basis, it may be added—so no claim is made for Weaver’s originality, only for his sophistication.



Red Flambé Vase with Volcanic Glaze, 1934



Green Flambé Vase Dated 1936



Two 1934 Vases with Flambé Glazes and a 1935 Gun Metal Glazed Vase

Another notable glaze used by Weaver is the familiar “gunmetal” glaze utilized by a number of potteries as early as the turn of the last century and still popular today with studio potters, although the term has been much abused, with even a “Gun Metal Green” currently being hawked. The term more usually applies to a black to grey to bronze glaze with metallic luster. Weaver clearly was able to achieve this. In fact, it is the most common glaze among the available Weaver pieces: there are a total of six pieces dating from 1932 to 1938, if one includes the Aladdin’s Lamp, which is not signed K.O.W.



Gun Metal Glaze, Dated 1943
(Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)

Weaver also appears to have been partial to mixed or blended glazes, both contrasting colors such as white or blue and magenta and more subtle combinations of greens and ochres. Not all attempts were successful, such as the small handled basket shown below.



“Even Homer Nods”
1933



1937



Candlestick 1938
(Both Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



1942 Miniature Jug
(Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



1936, 1935, 1943, 1941



1942

Small Flask

21



1942

Flat-sided Pitcher

22

Designed as gifts, some of Weaver's production was understandably relatively plain and utilitarian in design, although others are somewhat more artistic. These may also use the solid color tile hues used by U. S. Quarry Tile, specifically their light green and maroon glazes.



1935 and 1942-1943
(Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



Squaare and Hexagonal Dishes Dated 1936
(Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



Small Flambé Bowl 1937-1938
(Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)



Hexagonal Toothpick Holder Dated 1931
(Courtesy of Bethany Keel Shilling)



1937 Footed Dish



Small Oval Dish or Tray Dated 1937

The striking blue-green plates manufactured by U. S. Quarry Tile and by Sparta Ceramics during the 1950s were apparently made as gifts or for advert-



Four U.S. Quarry Tile 10" Plates, ca. 1955

ment items. One, commemorating the centennial of the Architectural Institute of America, is dated 1957, which confirms the period of production. This was too late for Ken O. Weaver to have had anything to do with their development or production. The present management of the company has not been able to provide any information about the plates or, for that matter, about Ken O. Weaver.



U.S. Quarry Tile 10" and Plates



Coaster Set Marked U. S. Quarry Tile Co.
(Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)

Conclusion

We can only speculate as to what might have happened if Ken O. Weaver's "pottery" had been recognized and encouraged. Confined by the klunky red clay and production methods more suited to ceramic tile than to art pottery, he was unable to go where Lawton Gonder did but nonetheless managed to create or find a variety of attractive art deco shapes and to develop some impressive glazes that were ahead of their time. It remains a mystery whether this artistry was solely the result of intuition and an isolated artistic talent, but such seems likely, making it all the more impressive an achievement, as there is no indication that he had formal training in art or ceramics. In the Keels' possession there is a small table made by Weaver that appears to me to be a very creditable piece of carpentry work in the Arts and Crafts style and indicates that his artistic impulse was not limited to ceramics. When one compares Weaver's efforts in ceramics to the attempts U.S. Ceramic Tile and Sparta Ceramic later made to develop giftware, his efforts, however amateurish and peripatetic, have far more appeal. This may be the reactionary view of a child of the '50s; however, while I can steel myself to a grudging appreciation of the ubiquitous blue-green USQT plates, I just wish there were more examples of K.O.W.'s work.

Acknowledgements

Foremost, I must thank Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel for their kindness in letting me photograph their collection of the work of Mr. Keel's uncle and providing additional information about Ken O. and Catherine Weaver. Mark Bassett provided a number of examples of Weaver's work as well as valuable commentary, and Brian Moore contributed useful input from the viewpoint of an experienced working potter.



Endtable Made By Ken. O. Weaver with 1937 Handled Bowl
(Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Max Keel)

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